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PASSAGE TO SAFETY

1940-1944

By Albert Baron

The Holocaust is the definitive account of a deliberate and well-planned genocide, carried out by Hitler's Nazis with cold calculation and scrupulous efficiency. It was the systematic attempt to destroy all European Jewry. Six million of Europe's eleven million Jews were slaughtered in concentration camps, slave labor camps, execution sites and death marches. More than twenty million people died during the Nazi Holocaust between 1940 and 1945. Those who survived against tremendous odds to tell their story are also the voices for those who perished. This is the story of my family's escape from Nazi capture and our passage to safety.

I was born in Nancy in northeastern France. Nancy, the capital of the Meurthe-et-Moselle Department in Lorraine, is located on the Meurthe River. It is a city of elegant and interesting old buildings and is the site of the Place Stanislas. In 1737, Stanislas Leszinski, the exiled king of Poland, was given the Duchy of Lorraine and named Duke of Lorraine by his father-in-law, King Louis XV. He built his palace on the Place Stanislas, one of the most beautiful squares in Europe. The square is lined with fountains and buildings dating from the 18th century.

My parents, Jacob Baron and Rose Klarman Baron were both born in Poland and immigrated to France as adolescents. My mother's older sister Tefila, who had immigrated to France earlier, introduced them. They were married shortly after and opened a men's and ladies ready-to-wear store and custom tailoring business. During my early childhood I was sent to Ecole-Fabre, a small Kindergarten located a short distance from my home. While I vacationed in the summer with my parents, my older sister Therese and my older brother Maurice were sent to a farm in the nearby Vosges Mountains. My father was respected in the community as both a successful businessman and a chess champion. Those were fond memories and pleasant times.

In September 1939, shortly after Germany invaded Poland, France and Britain declared war on Germany. This was the beginning of World War II and the start of the cold-blooded murder of Jews by German SS troops. By May 1940, Germany occupied most of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, except the Soviet Union. On May 12, 1940, Germany invaded France through Belgium, going around and over the "impenetrable" Maginot Line. France surrendered in June 1940.

Because of the proximity of Nancy to Germany, it was one of the first French cities to be bombed. We spent the better part of three weeks in a bomb shelter. While in the bomb shelter, a young child attempted to speak to a stranger. When the stranger refused to respond, the child told his father, who in turn approached the very nervous and aloof stranger. We were later told that the man apprehended was a German spy who earlier in the day had parachuted into the area.

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At the beginning of the war my father was drafted into the French Army. Because he was born in Poland and never naturalized as a French citizen, he was placed in the French Foreign Legion. He was sent to a military camp in Lyon, but soon returned to Nancy to make arrangements to move our family to the south of France. Although we were bombed nearly every day, we left Nancy during a period between bombings. Most of our belongings were loaded on an old truck, purchased hastily by my father, and headed southwest to the fairly large City of Toulouse, the capital of the province of Languedoc. My father felt that Toulouse would be a safe haven for our family, because my mother's sister Tefila, a naturalized French citizen, had already moved her family there.

For our journey south my uncle Vishnitz, who was married to one of my father's sisters, drove the truck. He left his wife and daughter behind and by the time he went back to rescue them, they had already been picked up and deported by the Gestapo. On route to Toulouse, the old truck, lacking gas and oil, stalled and had to be abandoned. On our way to the train station, we were strafed by German planes; luckily no one in our family was hit. We continued on our journey by train and finally arrived in the city of Toulouse, which is located on the Garonne River and the Canal du Midi.

In Toulouse, my father was caught in a roundup of Jews by the French police and taken to the "Prefecture," the local police station. One of my French cousins paid-off the chief of police to release him. The German invaders had instructed the French police and collaborators to assist in the arrest of all foreigners. If my father had been detained, he would have been interned as a foreigner in a "French work camp," and later would have been deported to a concentration camp.

We knew that my parents were hiding in my aunt's attic. Two agents of the French Gestapo came to our apartment to look for my father. They asked my older brother Maurice, who was incapacitated with water on the knee, to disclose my father's hiding place and advised us that if he was not located within one hour, they would come back for us. They took my sister Therese to direct them to my father's hiding place, but she was able to escape. At this time, my brother grabbed me by the hand, and although he was still in pain, led me to my aunt's apartment to join my parents and my sister. We were hidden for several days in various basements until we were able to escape by train to a small village at the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains, called Bagneres-de-Luchon. In Luchon, my father rented a small villa from a gentleman by the name of Monsieur Calve. Although he knew that we were Jews, he still agreed to rent his house to us.

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Since Luchon was located in that part of France designated as free France and not yet occupied by the Germans, we enjoyed a decent lifestyle for more than one year. We planted a vegetable garden in our front yard and picked grapes from the vineyard on the property. We went horseback riding in the summer and skied in the winter. My dad even had the foresight to hire a local rabbi to teach my brother and me the bible and to give us Hebrew lessons.

In November 1942, on my way home from school, I saw two German soldiers. One was sitting on a motorcycle and the other in a sidecar. I hurried home to tell my parents. The local police had already alerted them that the Germans now occupied the entire south of France and had issued instructions to make all Jews wear a yellow Star of David on their garments. Because of objections by local citizens, patches were issued with only the word "Juif" Jew. My dad refused to have us wear the patch. The Chief of Police of Luchon advised my father to take our family to Spain where Jews were being granted asylum. It was our only hope of evading capture and certain death. While my brother and I were hidden in a monastery and my sister in a convent, my father made arrangements to go to Spain.

On the evening of December 17, 1942, a week before Christmas, we began our treacherous journey. Our family was part of a group that included my Uncle Vishnitz and one of my dad's sisters, whose husband and only son had already been deported. No matter how dangerous, we were going to attempt to trek over the Pyrenees Mountains by foot in the midst of a snowstorm, hoping that the German and French patrols preoccupied with the holidays would not discover us or that the Spanish Border Guards would not turn us back.

For a generous sum of money, two Basque guides were hired to lead us over the mountain. Many of the Basques were smugglers who lived in the mountains and were very familiar with the trails leading to Spain. During the war many Basques were not allowed to live either in Spain or in France and to this day are still fighting for their independence.

As we proceeded on our grueling climb, my Uncle Vishnitz, too tired to continue, decided to descend and go a different route by himself. After the war, we learned that he had made his way to England and survived. The guide, who was carrying my mother's bag that contained food for the trip and jewelry that had been sewn into a false bottom, lost his footing and dropped it into a crevice. The bag was never recovered and my mom grieved over the loss of her jewelry for many years. After more than twenty-four hours of climbing we were finally at the Spanish border. As agreed, our guides left us at the border and disappeared.

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A Spanish Border Guard stopped us from proceeding any further and threatened to return us to France unless everyone gave him his money and valuables; needless to say everyone obliged. Not certain how or where to proceed, we remained on the side of a main road hoping for assistance. My dad told me later that I fell asleep standing up. I was only eight years old at the time.

Soon after dark, a gentleman came up the road on a bicycle. He was a member of the "Guardia Civil," the Spanish National Guard, on his way to Bouscos. He directed us to this nearest village where we were given shelter for the night in the village jail. Several hours after the local police chief was told of our unfortunate encounter with the border guard, our confiscated valuables were returned to us. We suspect that the Spaniards did not want to be known as thieves. After spending the night in Bouscos and the next two nights in the larger village of Viella, we were placed on army trucks bound for Lerida where we were to be met by a member of the American Joint Committee to assist us on our trip to Barcelona.

When we arrived in Lerida, my dad and every male in our group were arrested as foreigners and interned for a short period of time. Soon after their release, we were placed on trains bound for Barcelona, a major city and port on the coast of the Mediterranean, where we would reside until our departure for Canada in March of 1944.

In Barcelona, although we were allowed to live in peace, my parents could not be gainfully employed. These were the only conditions imposed on the refugees by the Franco Government that is estimated to have rescued approximately 45000 Jews during the war. We survived on the remaining funds that my parents carried with them and assistance from JDC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and HIAS, the American Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. We moved to a small apartment and my siblings and I were sent to local Spanish schools. I recall that many times my father took me to the Plaza De Catalunya, a large square where many of the refugees gathered to socialize, play chess or cards and discuss the war.

In June of 1943, my sister Therese, along with other teenage children, left for America on a Portuguese registered vessel called the S.S. Serpa Pinto. Portugal, electing to remain a neutral nation during the war, was allowed passage on the ocean. The United States refused asylum to immigrants, but agreed to accept some children, providing they were sponsored. My father's oldest sister, a naturalized American citizen living in the city of Detroit, Michigan, sponsored my sister. Our immediate family could not follow my sister to the United States.

Early in 1944, my parents were informed that some immigrants were finally being allowed into Canada. During prewar days and during most of the war the Canadian Government, which was notoriously Anti-Semitic, closed its doors to all immigrants.

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My father immediately applied for immigration, and since French was our principal language, we were accepted for entry to Montreal in the Province of Quebec, the French speaking part of Canada. He was given the option of sailing either in late March or in May from Lisbon, Portugal, on the same S.S. Serpa Pinto that brought my sister to America. Since the war was still ongoing, my father decided to leave while it was still possible, on the first crossing. He felt that it would be easier to later enter the United States from Canada to join my sister and my aunt. In early March 1944, we left Barcelona by train via Madrid headed for Lisbon to await our departure.

On March 23, 1944, we left Lisbon on the S.S. Serpa Pinto bound for the port of Philadelphia in the United States of America. From there, we would make our way to Montreal by train. First, our ship made port in the Azores to take aboard a cargo of pineapples. The Serpa Pinto was a semi-freighter that carried about 280 passengers. Our journey across the Atlantic was to take about 11 days, but we were delayed by bad weather and finally arrived in Philadelphia on April 6, 1944. During the extra days at sea, many of the passengers became seasick, the ship ran out of food and we were fed pineapples for the remainder of the trip. To this day, I refuse to eat pineapple.

We were fortunate that we were able to cross the ocean without incident during the war. We learned that on the May 1944 crossing, a German U-boat intercepted the Serpa Pinto in mid-Atlantic. Everyone was ordered into lifeboats, and after several hours of questioning passengers, the Germans allowed the neutral ship to proceed with its passengers and crew back on board. Unfortunately, the ship's doctor with a young baby in his arms fell to their death.

When we made port in Philadelphia, we were met and escorted by the United States Coast Guard and border police. Since the Roosevelt government had closed its doors to all refugees, the police were there to assure that none of the passengers escaped. We were bused to the train station, boarded on trains and finally arrived in Montreal on April 7, 1944, on the second night of Passover. Mr. Garfinkle, who volunteered to assist our family to acclimate to a new way of life, welcomed us at the train station. We spent our first evening in Montreal at a Passover Seder at the Montreal Talmud Torah, a local Hebrew school.

After four years of searching for safety from persecution, internment and inevitable death, our family was free.

My Dad was a very courageous man and his wise decisions at the young age of thirty-eight were marked with the wisdom that "survival has no obstacles for the brave". He was one of the unsung heroes of the Holocaust.

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